Cultural Daily

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To Pass the Time

John Shim · Tuesday, August 24th, 2021

Marie Chen did not enjoy life in the psychiatric ward.

The events of the day leading up to now were rather fuzzy in her mind. A suicide attempt, a bumpy ambulance ride, nothing much of it remained in her memory beyond the vague notion that it was her that had experienced those things. And so here she was, sitting in a tiny lounge, lit by a single fluorescent white light, with the nurse on night shift across from her reading a book.

Marie was already a social outcast so she was used to the long stretches of silence that would occupy her days. Some of the other inpatients were clearly not and filled the time with idle, meaningless chatter about this or that. She played chess with another of the inpatients, but it was a rather menial hobby — the two of them barely spoke, only remarking occasionally at their own blunders or their opponents' good play, or to end the game with a "good game" and a handshake. She didn't even know the other girl's name — she didn't pay attention during their so-called "group therapy" sessions, and had never bothered to ask the girl her name — yet she felt the most connected to the girl by virtue of their mutual boredom. The best part about the day was the end of the day, where everybody went to their rooms and she got some time to herself, or as much time to herself as she could get with the pile of rocks opposite her acting like a parent pretending they weren't watching her.

The worst part of hospital life wasn't the mediocre food, or the inability to move around as she pleased, or even the annoying inpatients, for the most part. Humans can grow used to almost anything so those quickly became the norm after a few days. No, the worst part of hospital life was the sheer boredom, time filled with performative self-help sessions in which some hospital board had decided that fifteen minutes of yoga would surely be the solution to the inpatients' lack of exercise (or the cheapest alternative to actually getting them some exercise space and equipment), or that what was really missing was for these teenagers to talk to a bunch of people they'd never met about their innermost fears, hopes, desires, and regrets. It was just forcing a group of people who didn't want to help themselves to pretend to help themselves and others. A bunch of nonsense. As if the already mentally ill were going to break open their hearts, or even knew themselves well enough to diagnose the problem and implement a solution. What kind of teenager was going to know themselves well enough to do that?

The hospital itself was rather dull. The windows opened only a few centimeters, enough to let some stale air in but not enough to actually enjoy the breeze. White paint was cracking everywhere, and there was scrawled graffiti from previous inpatients in the corners of her shared

bedroom, some banal, some bad, nothing good. The shampoo offered was lacking in quality and smelled like a bar of hand soap mixed with acetone. Worst of all, the toilet paper was one-ply. Even the tissues felt like she was shaving a layer of skin off of her nose every time she used one. It felt like the entire hospital had been established with the sole purpose of extracting money from the desperate and rich parents of the mentally ill.

The singular attempt at adding color to the environment consisted entirely of the singular rug in the middle of the lounge area. There were some magazines here and there, but they were either condescendingly juvenile or filled with meaningless gossip about this or that celebrity from ten years ago. Who would want to read about people in the outside world going about their day when they were quite literally locked up? It was like giving prisoners a raving review of a three-star Michelin restaurant. At best, it pacified them with delusions of the future. At worst, it made them even less satisfied with the shittiness of the present. From her experience of her fellow teenagers, Marie thought the latter was far more likely.

“What’s got you up this late?”

The pile of rocks spoke. She read the name on the badge. Kristine. Even the name read as if some ethical committee had made the resolution to make life as boring and mundane as possible. As if there wasn’t enough mundanity in the world already. Marie knew that it was irrational to judge people in such a manner; it wasn’t as if the nurse had a choice in her name. But her image of the hospital certainly wasn’t improved by the hospital staff having names out of a typical American sitcom.

“Couldn’t sleep.”

A simple response, indicative of the typical depth of conversation in the psychiatric ward. Of course she was up late because she couldn’t sleep. Otherwise she would be asleep.

Even if she stayed up late, there was nothing to do. Nothing she could do. If she was outside, at least she could go visit the cemetery. She could imagine what happened to Susie Washington, who was born in 1947 and died in 1998, “beloved by her family and her community.” She could visit George Jackson, who was born in 1932 and died in 1968, a “patriot who loved his country.” Here, there was nothing but a busted up television that was never even used and bruised furniture that simultaneously seemed to be brand new and fifty years old.

“Uhm.”

The nurse looked up. It must have been a shock for the taciturn girl to engage in conversation without being pressed.

“Is that… book interesting?”

“Not particularly. Gives me something to pass the time, though.”

“… I see.”

Their conversation stopped there. She hadn’t really been interested in the nurse’s book, or the nurse herself. It was something to do, better than the rabid, unrestrained introspection that came with doing nothing. Just like the chess games, the sudoku puzzles with answers messily erased so

that you could still see the indentations of the pencil, the therapy, the yoga, the terrible food, the gaudy magazines and the annoying conversations of her peers.

Just something to pass the time.

Without speaking, Marie got up and went back to her room, opening and closing the door with an uncomfortably loud noise. Her roommate didn't budge from her slumber, leaving Marie to slide under the sheets and close her eyes.

> How many pieces of paper had she used so far, during her stay? How much bread did her father have to sell in order to pay for both her mother's and her own hospital fees?

She wondered how the old man was doing. The man hated moving from his deck. He spent most of his time alone, but he wouldn't dare walk next door and ask her father what happened to her. He was too proud to admit that he enjoyed her company.

She'd missed the last week of school, here in this place. Normally missing school would have been a teen's dream. But it's not like school was particularly bad for her. She was smart enough to get by in the classes without regular attendance, so her grades were decent and she got to skip class in the library. It was annoying talking with all the teachers and having to repeat the same explanations over and over, but some of them were understanding and all of them complied when the school counselor and social worker decided to set up meetings.

Turning over in her bed, she heard the buzzing of a bug. Perhaps it was a moth, or a fly, but either way, it was making an overabundance of noise for an insect as it crashed against the blinds. How annoying. Why couldn't it just be quiet? Clearly it wasn't going anywhere anytime soon.

Of course, Marie also knew that she was just the same. If she had less restraint, or had been raised in a different environment, no doubt she would have been just like her peers and been loudly complaining about this and that, day in and day out. Crashing her head against a wall, just doing something to pass the time. She suspected that somehow, it felt empowering to rail against a system, to conquer it with words even if you could not conquer it with actions. A bit of retribution in the mind. She didn't fault her peers for such minute victories. She just wished they weren't so loud about it.

Perhaps that was her problem: she saw people as objects, things to be manipulated by their environment, by their circumstances, whether those circumstances were their parents, their genetics, the myriad of coincidences they encountered growing up or their childhood teachers. It was a web of connections that no one mind could possibly map out and comprehend, let alone try to calculate and understand on a larger, societal scale. So she felt listless, bored. Like everything that was within her reach had been discovered already, and everything that wasn't discovered wasn't within her reach. At least her peers, they had something to look forward to, on the outside. What did she have to look forward to?

In the modern cultural landscape, Marie thought, it was too easy to feel like that moth, or that fly, or whatever that bug continuing to crash against the window blinds was. Like just another talking head, with no actual way to change things. So many things wrong, so few solutions offered. The

worst part was the self-awareness of it all. Everybody knew what they were doing to themselves, what they were ignoring in the background as they wasted their time away doing this or that, online or in person. It was an addiction, this escapism, something to ease the pain.

It was just something to pass the time.

No, no. Surely she was being too dismissive of others, as she tended to be. That was a fear of hers — being too dismissive, as if she held all the answers. She held no answers; what were her credentials in criticizing the ways other people dealt with their existence? She was a schoolgirl, she knew nothing of the way the world worked, even much of what the world contained within it, the sheer number of modes of being, ways of living. She had no right to criticize the answers of others without putting forth some better alternative.

And even the answers she might put forward, uncomfortably and with constant assurances that she didn't know the precise details (so as not to commit to them too heavily, lest she end up wrong), would be simply stolen from the most recent book she had read, or the most convincing argument she had seen online. What, could such a thing even be considered critical thinking? Wasn't it something akin to thievery, stealing this and that from each and every person she encountered if she thought it sounded smart?

Even her own thoughts sounded pretentious. Where had she picked up such thoughts and ideas? Her father was a rather down-to-earth immigrant parent, her mother a pretty religious, but otherwise quiet type who seemed content with her Sunday service and a few prayers a day. It wasn't as if her mother was a zealot who forced Marie to go to church — after all, Marie had simply stopped going one day, splitting her time between helping her father run the bakery or visiting the cemetery and the elderly home down the road.

All the constant picking apart and attempts at reassembling herself made her even more tired, and it never led to anything substantive anyways, just a bit more of self-hatred and self-absorption — as if she didn't have enough of that already. She let out a long yawn, noticing briefly that the bug had stopped making its noise.

Sliding out of bed, she approached the window and saw the bug's outline frozen still. As she poked with her finger, it restarted its crazed attempts to free itself from the hospital by way of the window, but failed at even separating itself from the confines of the blinds. She wondered how it had managed to put itself in such a predicament.

Cupping the bug in her hands, she stepped out of the room once again, drawing briefly the attention of the nurse in the chair. This time it was a different nurse — he was a big man with a big mustache, like the kind you'd see in old-timey portraits of Civil War heroes. She could easily imagine him in a military uniform being sent as cannon fodder, or sending others as cannon fodder, in some Napoleonic battle.

"Could you let me out into the courtyard for a moment?"

The man let out a groan as he got up from the chair, setting down the Sudoku book. How he derived any pleasure from those when they'd all been filled in was beyond her. Perhaps he'd found some that were untouched?

"Sure. Got a bug?"

“Mm.”

The light in the hallway as she peeked into her hands showed the definite form of a moth, flapping its wings. Quickly closing her hands again so as not to let it out, she hurried to match pace with the nurse. As the two made their way out into the courtyard, Marie took a deep breath. It was much more satisfying to do so without the noise of other people, she decided.

As the girl opened her hands, the moth hesitated for a split second before dashing off. Marie hesitated for a moment, too, before turning around and heading inside.

(Featured image of moth by Flickr user Jordan Wall)

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